Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, 37 (1), pp 83–102 February 2006. Printed in the United Kingdom.
 doi:10.1017/S0022463405000433

A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast

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This article challenges the perceived image of 'traditional' Vietnam by viewing the polity's early history from the sea. A trading zone existed in the Gulf of Tonkin area, stretching to Hainan Island and northern Champa by sea, and overland to Yunnan and Laos. Commerce and interactions of peoples in this area played a crucial part in state formation for Vietnam.

An interesting observation about Vietnamese historiography is that although the coast comprises roughly one-third of Vietnam's territory, historians have consistently regarded it as second only to landlocked Laos as a solidly land-based polity amongst the mainland Southeast Asian countries.[1] This article challenges the land-based gaze of looking to the north, instead viewing Vietnam from the sea. As will be shown below, the Gulf of Tonkin region was an extension and an integral part of an area called the Jiaozhi Ocean (*Jiaozhi Yang*), an active trading zone located right in the heart of the more ancient Western Sea Route (*Xiyang Hanglu* in Chinese) up to the fifteenth century, and frequented by Muslim traders from South, West and Southeast Asia. This trading zone included the Guangxi coast facing the Tonkin Gulf, coastal Đại Việt, northern Champa and Hainan Island.

The fairly frequent and intensive interactions between these entities as revealed in this article challenge the perceived view that, although physically located next to each other, they shared little in common, whether culturally or economically. It would have been no accident that a cluster of political, religious and trading centres appeared in this

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This article has benefited from two international workshops: Southeast Asia in Maritime Perspective: The Sea as Centre, Center for Asian Studies, University of California at Irvine, 28–29 Feb. 2004; and Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources, Institute of Sinology, Munich, 25–26 Feb. 2005. My thanks to Charles Wheeler and Roderich Ptak for providing me chances to present my rough ideas at the workshops for valuable feedback. Part of this article was published in Japanese in the journal *Toyoshi Kenkyu*, 63, 3 (2004); my thanks to Akinori Nakasuna for his translation and his careful checking of the original sources. Thanks also to Nola Cooke, Victor Lieberman, Bruce Lockhart and David Marr for their help and comments.

1 For a systematic revisionist view on how early Đại Việt was situated in South China Sea trade networks, see Momoki Shiro, 'Đại Việt and the South China Sea trade from the 10th to the 15th century', *Crossroads*, 12, 1 (1998): 1–34; and Christopher Goscha, 'The borders of Vietnam's early wartime trade with Southern China: A contemporary perspective', *Asian Survey*, 40, 6 (2000): 987–1018. An eloquent argument on the importance of the sea is in Charles Wheeler's article in this issue.

zone in the thirteenth century, collectively creating the necessary conditions under which ceramics production – Đại Việt's leading export activity at the time – was able to thrive. This industry largely existed for the overseas market, driven and mediated by the Muslim merchants. As it flourished in concert with other industries that developed in the area, this sector deserves more examination, rather than being dismissed as insignificant when evaluated only in terms of its share of the economy. Such an enquiry into trade and industry also draws our attention to the various peoples active in this region at the time, a perspective which in turn seems to reveal a quite different map of ethnicity than that found in present-day Vietnam.

The *Jiaozhi Yang* and the pivotal role of modern central Vietnam

Contrary to the general belief that Jiaozhi (northern Vietnam) was connected to China by the narrow waters of the Gulf of Tonkin, until the Tang dynasty the Gulf was largely avoided in travel between Jiaozhi and China because of the huge rocks hidden along the coast. This was why Ma Yuan, the 'Wave-Pacifying General' of the Han dynasty, had to 'open channels through mountains to avoid the sea' during his campaign against Jiaozhi in the first century CE. This obstacle was only overcome in the ninth century, when the rocks were removed under the famous Tang governor Gao Pian (Cao Biền in Vietnamese).[2]

The difficult conditions in the Gulf of Tonkin gave central Vietnam, particularly the modern Nghệ-Tĩnh sub-region, an important historical role in regional maritime travel. The maritime route went east of Hainan to Fujian and Guangdong, while overland a path across the Trường Sơn Cordillera connected to the region known to the Chinese as 'Lu Zhenla' (probably southern Laos and/or northern Cambodia) and then to the sea, forming the basis of a well-known eighth-century route.[3] Strikingly, when this route is traced on a map it connects to the Western Route, the most ancient long-distance passage for traffic between the Indian Ocean and China; the Eastern Route, used by Chinese and Southeast Asian vessels, was only developed later. Thus, unlike the latter, the more ancient Western Route used by merchants from the Indian Ocean was most likely a

2 This was how dangerous the sea route of the Gulf of Tonkin was in Gao Pian's eyes: 'You must give up hope of coming back alive, as soon as you board a ship [in this area]'; 'Gao Pian kai hailu', in Sun Guangxian, *Beimeng suoyan*, collected in *Congshu jicheng chubian* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1936), *juan* 2, p. 9. On Ma Yuan see 'Tianwei jing xinzao haipai pei', in Phan Văn Các and Claudine Salmon, *Épigraphie en chinois du Viêt Nam = Văn khắc Hán Nôm Việt Nam* (Paris and Hanoi: École Française d'Extrême-Orient and Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm, 1998), pp. 33–40.

3 Ouyang Xiu *et al.*, *Xin Tangshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), *juan* 43, pp. 1151–2. Maspéro thought that the overland route went across the Keo Nua Pass to Laos, while Đào Duy Anh believed that it was more likely from the Quy Họp area; Quy Họp was the most important contact point between Vietnam and Laos throughout the centuries. See Đào Duy Anh, *Đất nước Việt Nam qua các đời* (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1964), p. 198. Central Vietnam's China connections were so strong that John Whitmore and other scholars think there arose a culture that was more open to the Sinic world than the capital region (Whitmore, 'The rise of the coast' in this issue).

4 Roderich Ptak, 'Jottings on Chinese sailing routes to Southeast Asia, especially on the Eastern Route in Ming times', in Ptak, *China, the Portuguese, and the Nanyang* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), p. 109. A reminder of central Vietnam's place on the Western Route is the fact that in the first attempt by the Roman Empire at establishing maritime contacts with China in the second century CE, the presents sent by the envoys of Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus included 'elephant tusks, rhinoceros horns and tortoise shells', all of which were typical commodities from central Vietnam at the time; Wang Gungwu, *The Nanhai trade: The early history of Chinese trade in the South China Sea* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), p. 25.

combination of sea and overland routes, with central Vietnam at its crossroads.[4] Modern northern central Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin, with their mountainous hinterland, in fact straddled the Western Route.

Central Vietnam also served as Cambodia's primary point of access to the South China Sea, which helps explain why the Khmer kings sent 'tribute' more often to Đại Việt (19 times) than they did to Song China (five times). Traders using this route are specifically mentioned as being of Vietnamese origin in early Khmer epigraphy, such as a 987 CE inscription from the lower Mekong region.[5] More evidence that central Vietnam served as the maritime access route for Jiaozhi can also be found in the story of King An Dương Vương in the second century BCE. Pursued by the army of Triệu Đà (Zhao Tuo), 'he fled to the seaside and could not find any ship or boat to escape'; significantly, the place of his defeat was Diễn Châu, in Nghệ An.[6]

Central Vietnam was thus almost certainly the gateway for local maritime travel – the place where most merchants, pilgrims and envoys landed first before heading up the river to Jiaozhou (Viet. Giao Châu), its capital. Transport on this route could have been in the hands of South Asian and Middle Eastern merchants, while travel between Jiaozhou and areas to the south would have been carried out by smaller ships or boats, a speciality of Việt sailors in maritime travel according to Wang Gungwu.[7] They transported cargoes from the big ships from the Middle East and South Asia, the main force engaged in trade in the South China Sea until the Tang period.

These historical connections between northern and central Vietnam explain a rather confused Chinese term, whose interpretation is important to our understanding of the region. In the thirteenth century there appeared a term '*Jiaozhi Yang*' (Jiaozhi Ocean), no doubt derived from Jiaozhi (Viet. Giao Chỉ), the old Chinese name for Đại Việt. However, whether it referred to the Gulf of Tonkin or to the sea along the central Vietnamese coast was never clear; in most sources it seemed to refer to the latter and to exclude the former, while in others it encompassed both.[8] In the vagueness of this term, it now seems,

5 Kenneth Hall, *Maritime trade and state development in early Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985), p. 184; Hall reckons that the Việt traders used a Mekong River route to enter Cambodia, from Nghệ An through the Hà Trai Pass and down the Mekong (p. 173). On tribute see Momoki, 'Đại Việt', p. 15.

6 *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (henceforth *TT*), ed. Chen Chingho (Tokyo: Keio University, 1984), *Ngoại kỷ*, 1: 9b. The importance of the sea–river connection between the northern and central regions is supported by studies of Vietnamese historical anthropology. Most of the major cattle trading centres were located in Nghệ An, and the largest market in the region was in Nghi Lộc district near Vinh, the provincial capital. The cattle seem to have been brought by junk from Laos over the Cả River to the market on the coast before being transported to the Red River Delta. The junks would bring back big terracotta jars, which were produced in the Delta; Nguyễn Đức Nghinh, 'Markets and villages', in *The traditional village in Vietnam*, ed. Phan Huy Lê (Hanoi: Thế giới, 1993), pp. 324–5.

7 Wang, *Nanhai trade*, pp. 4–5, 12, 21.

8 A detailed discussion of the primary Chinese sources on this topic is in Li Tana, 'The rise and fall of the Jiaozhi Ocean', paper for the international workshop on Maritime Space in Traditional Chinese Sources, Munich, 25–26 Feb. 2005. The clearest indication of *Jiaozhi Yang*'s location is found in *Lingwai daida*: 'The route [to China] from Srivijaya takes the direction North-North, passing the Upper and Lower Zhu Islands and the Jiao [zhi] Yang. Those going to Guangzhou would enter by Tunmen, and those going to Quanzhou would take Jiazimen'; Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai daida* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1998), p. 126. The appearance of the term itself supports Whitmore's central argument in his 'Rise of the coast' that Ly Đại Việt, like Angkor and Pagan, was focused on the upper portion of its territory until the thirteenth century, when the Song trade led to a move to the coast and the major change in the Vietnamese state.

there is embedded a historical memory which recognised the oneness of the two areas, the northern and central Vietnamese coasts. Although this is never fully spelt out, it seems that the Tonkin Gulf area must have been considered as an extension of the Jiaozhi Ocean, which lay along the central Vietnamese coast and had for thousands of years been the pivot of travel between the East and West.

There are a few points worth mentioning about the term *Jiaozhi Yang*. First, it appeared in most of the Chinese travel logs between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, but never in any official documents or chronicles. This suggests its close connections with private Chinese merchants, traders and perhaps pirates, as well as the nature of trade in this area. Second, the term only appeared in the thirteenth century and not earlier. While it must have reflected the general growth of Chinese maritime knowledge in the Song period, in the Tonkin Gulf these changes had been facilitated by late Tang improvements in coastal travel. Both of these characteristics are important for our understanding of the area, and it was within this context that the *Jiaozhi Yang* trading zone came into existence.

The following sections will examine this trading zone by focusing on the slave, horse and salt trades in the area, which stretched from Yunnan and Guangxi in China to Champa in present-day central Vietnam, and from the mountains to the sea. This search inevitably leads us to consider the place of maritime trade and Muslim merchants in participating and shaping Đại Việt's history, before returning our focus to local history and the ethnographic map. The evidence examined below demonstrates the rather high degree of maritime dependence that characterised Đại Việt's economy up to the fifteenth century.

Regional trade in the Jiaozhi Ocean zone

The slave trade

While it is well known that Cham merchants were active slave traders, it has hardly been mentioned that the land of Đại Việt might have been a crucial station in this lucrative trade. As written in a thirteenth-century Chinese book on the life and customs of Guangxi and the Gulf of Tonkin region:

> There were not many local people in this country [Đại Việt], [because] half of the population was from Guangdong and Guangxi. Merchants to the south would pretend to buy people as their servants and, when they arrived at the barbarian mountains, the merchants would tie them up and sell them to the peoples there. The price was two *taels* of gold per person. The mountain peoples would resell them to Jiaozhi, and the price became 3 *taels* of gold. Hardly a year passed without hundreds or thousands of people being sold. The price for those with skills was double, and for those who could read and write it was doubled again.[9]

Another contemporary source, the thirteenth-century *Lingwai daida*, made the relations between gold and slave trading in Jiaozhi even clearer: 'The people in Jiaozhi have the advantage of gold [and] thus tend to buy our people [in Guangxi] as slaves.' When these two accounts are put together with a record in the well-known contemporary source

9 Fan Chengda, *Guihai yuheng zhi jiaobu*, ed. Qi Zhiping (Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1984), p. 53.

Zhufanzhi, the meaning of the excerpt below stands out: 'The most important festival of the country [Đại Việt] is on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month, when every family exchanges presents with others. The officials present *shengkou* [slaves] to the king, who will give the officials a feast on the 16th day in return.'[10] Officials at the time must have regarded slaves as very precious gifts, and they knew they would be rewarded for them.

Vietnamese chronicles add another piece of evidence on the important role of slaves in the Lý dynasty (1009–1225), complementing the contemporary Chinese records cited above. According to the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* chronicle, the magic skills of a slave from Dali (Yunnan) were used in a 1096 court conspiracy by his master, who intended to kill Emperor Lý Nhân Tông.[11] This account agrees with the Chinese evidence that skilled people were valued and that slaves came from the north.

The phenomenon of slaving explains the frequent correspondence between Song China and Lý Đại Việt regarding raiding and the return of populations. No doubt the lack of manpower in Đại Việt played a part in this – and many Chinese slaves did become soldiers in the Vietnamese army – but many others must have been resold to the foreign merchants who frequented Đại Việt, and ended up in places such as Champa.[12] Slaves were one of the major commodities carried away by the South Sea ships (*Nanhai po*) owned by overseas merchants, who sometimes brought dark-skinned people known as *Kunlun nu* (Kunlun slaves) into China as a rarity, but who exported slaves from there as well.[13]

One piece of evidence for such human movement was King Fan Wen (r. 331–49) of Linyi, a polity usually viewed as a precursor of what later became known as Champa. According to an important classical Chinese source, the *Shuijing zhu*, Fan Wen was from Yangzhou in the Yangzi River Delta and had been kidnapped into slavery when he was young. He was resold to Jiaozhou and was later bought by some Cham merchants who traded there and finally landed in Linyi. In time, he became the prime minister, and eventually the king of that country. Most of the previous literature mentions Fan Wen's Chinese origins but omits the detail that he was sold to Jiaozhou first before being brought to Champa, no doubt regarding this as incidental.[14] When put into the historical context outlined above, however, it shows that the slave trade was a centuries-old practice in this area, that it was associated with both Chinese and overseas merchants and that Jiaozhou was at least a stepping stone, if not a crucial market in this trade.

10 Zhou, *Lingwai daida*, p. 270; Zhao Rukua, *Zhufanzhi* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), p. 3.

11 *TT*, *bản kỷ*, 3: 13a; all subsequent references to this chronicle are from the *bản kỷ* section unless otherwise noted.

12 For examples of correspondence between China and Đại Việt see *Xu zizhi tongjian changbian*, in *Wenyuan ge siku quanshu*, History 160, *juan* 9 (Taipei: Shangwu Press, 1982 reprint); and Xu Song, *Song huiyao jigao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1957 reprint), for the years 1059, 1070, 1084 and 1086. Chinese slaves in the Vietnamese army are mentioned in *Xu zizhi, juan* 349, year 1089.

13 James K. Chin, 'Ports, merchants, chieftains and eunuchs', in *Guangdong: Archaeology and early texts*, ed. Shing Müller *et al.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), p. 228.

14 See, for example, Georges Coedès, *The Indianized states of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella and tr. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968), p. 44; and D. G. E. Hall, *A history of Southeast Asia*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 30. An exception is Georges Maspéro, *Le royaume de Champa* (Paris and Brussels: G. Vanoest, 1928), p. 55. Fan Wen's account is in *Shuijing zhu* (Shanghai: Shangwu, 1936), *juan* 36.

It is worth speculating in this context how much of Đại Việt's obvious prosperity in the twelfth century had to do with the slave trade. Here, for example, is the country's list of tribute to the Southern Song in the year 1156:

> The tribute is extremely rich and all the characters in the letter were written with gold. There were 1200 *tael*s of gold wares, half of them decorated with pearls or valuables; 100 pearls contained in gold vases, of which three were as big as eggplants, six as big as the cores of jackfruit, 24 as big as peach pits, 17 as big as palm hearts, and 50 as big as date pits, making a total of 100; there were 1000 catties of aloewood, 50 kingfisher feathers, 850 bolts of gold brocade decorated with dragons, six imperial horses complete with saddles, plus the regular tribute of eight horses and five elephants. The envoys were quite proud of being able to bring so rich a tribute.[15]

The size of the pearls mentioned above deserves a few words. Although the area along the Guangxi coast (Hepu district) and the Gulf of Tonkin was well known for producing pearls, the latter were not believed to be as good or as big as those from India. The 50 big pearls listed above might thus have originated from Đại Việt's trade with South Asia; if so, this implies the extent to which wealth was being exchanged between the two.[16] Overall, scattered evidence like this implies that the wealth of Lý and early Trần Đại Việt might have been quite considerable.

Horses from Yunnan and salt from the sea

Another important trade item in Lý Đại Việt was horses. They were one of the most important commodities Champa obtained from the Vietnamese. The *Song huiyao* recorded that Cham travelled 'on elephants or palanquins made of cotton fabric, or else [rode] on horses which were traded from Jiaozhou'. The Ming source *Dongxi yangkao* also confirmed that 'during the Song period Champa often bought horses from Jiaozhi, therefore Jiaozhi had horse tails as one of its local commodities'.[17] Horses were not raised locally in Jiaozhi, however; they were obtained from the 'Man' (a term for 'barbarian' used by the Chinese and Vietnamese) in today's Yunnan and Guangxi border area.[18] Vietnamese sources give specific localities where horses could be obtained. In 1012, for instance, when the Man peoples came to the Kim Hoa and Vị Long areas to trade, Emperor Lý Thái Tổ 'ordered that [they] and their more than 10,000 horses be captured'. In such raids, which were sometimes led by Việt rulers themselves, horses were one of the most sought-after items. The thirteenth-century *Việt sử lược* recorded that in 1008

15 Zhou, *Lingwai daida*, *juan* 2, p. 57.

16 Wang Gungwu, *Nanhai trade*, pp. 19–20, mentions the quality of the pearls. That such big pearls came from places beyond the Gulf of Tonkin is also shown in the Vietnamese chronicles, which record that in 1066 a Javanese merchant brought 'a pearl that shone at night' ('*yeguang zhu*' in Chinese) and that the Lý court paid some 10,000 ṣtrings of cash for it (*TT*, 3: 4a). This must have encouraged more merchants to trade in the area.

17 *Song huiyao jigao*, *juan* 8116, p. 1; *Dongxi yangkao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), p. 15. Horses must have been numerous in Jiaozhi if ordinary people used them for transportation. In 1128 the Lý court issued an edict to forbid people riding on horses, as a gesture of national mourning for the recently deceased Emperor Nhân Tông; *Việt sử lược* (Ch. *Yue shilue*) (henceforth *VSL*), 3: 1a, in *Congshu jicheng* (Shanghai: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1936), p. 47.

18 Horses were a medium of payment for taxes in the prefectures along the Sino-Việtnamese borders; Gu Zuyu, *Dushi fangyu jiyao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1955 reprint), *juan* 111, pp. 4513, 4527.

Emperor Lê Ngọa Triều 'personally led a raid on the two districts of Đỗ Lãng and Vị Long, capturing Man people and few hundred horses'. In both cases the area of Vị Long stands out from the records as a crucial source of horses for Đại Việt.[19] This seems to explain, at least in part, why for centuries the Lý court turned a particularly keen eye on the area and married various princesses to the local chief, the He (Viet. Hà) family.[20]

The most common commodity that Việt people traded for horses was salt. The *Lingwai daida* recorded that 'the Fan [another term for barbarians] sold horses to the government yearly in exchange for commodities, salt and oxen; failing that they would block the horse routes'.[21] Interestingly, the Việt did not necessarily produce the salt that they exchanged for horses. The *Việt sử lược* reveals that as late as 1206, a large part of the coastal area was ruled by local chiefs; for example, the two important salt-producing areas of Đằng Châu and Khoái Châu (in modern Hưng Yên) were under other lords rather than the Lý emperors. As John Whitmore has pointed out, the barrier between lower and upper Đại Việt was only removed in the 1220s as the result of a joint effort between the Lý and their successors the Trần dynasty (1225–1400), and it was the first time in history that these two zones were effectively brought together.[22]

From this point of view, the horse trade formed one of the key links in the mountain-sea exchange chain of this region and was an important component of the Việt economy. Only in this context could one understand, for example, why Nanzhao, and the routes leading there, occupied the thinking of contemporary Vietnamese and Chinese governors alike; and how a kingdom that seems so remote to modern Vietnamese could invade the Việt capital four times (846, 860, 862 and 863) and occupy it for two years (863–5). Horses were in fact the very reason that local chiefs invited the mighty Nanzhao to invade their territory, after Li Zhuo, the Chinese governor of what was then the Tang Protectorate of Annam, enforced an unreasonably low price on the exchange rate between salt and horses.[23] Furthermore, it is possible to argue that it was these same Nanzhao invasions that greatly weakened Tang rule in the protectorate and thus paved the way for Việt independence in 939. Even in the twelfth century, Yunnan still played an important role in Việt politics, when Dali royalty adopted a prince born to a concubine of

19 Kim Hoa Bộ was today's Quảng Uyên district in Cao Bằng, while Vị Long Châu was the present-day Chiêm Hoa district of Tuyên Quang province; the location of Đỗ Lãng is unknown (Đào Duy Anh, *Đất nước Việt Nam*, pp. 92 and 189). The 1012 incident is in *TT*, 2: 6a; for the 1008 raid see *VSL*, 1: 22a. Another reference records that in 1006 Vị Long district presented a white pony to Lê Ngọa Triều (*TT*, 1: 28b).

20 Several instances of Lý princesses marrying Vị Long governers are mentioned: 1036 (*TT*, 2: 24b), 1082 (*TT*, 3: 11a) and 1180 (*VSL*, 3: 10a). See also Các and Salmon, *Épigraphie en chinois*, p. 93.

21 *Lingwai daida*, *juan* 10 ('*Man su*'), p. 416.

22 Whitmore, 'Rise of the coast'; see *VSL*, 3: 17b for Đại Hoàng (west of Nam Định and north of Ninh Bình) and 3: 18b for Đằng Châu and Khoái Châu (Hưng Yên). For the location of these areas, see Đào Duy Anh, *Đất nước Việt Nam*, pp. 91–3.

23 Li Zhuo's policy is mentioned in *TT*, *Ngoại kỷ*, 5: 8b–9a. See also Keith Taylor, *The birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), pp. 240–1; Edward Schafer, *The vermillion bird* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. 67; and John K. Whitmore, 'Colliding peoples: Tai/Viet interactions in the 14th and 15th centuries', paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies, San Diego, 2000. Detailed routes and distances of each between Annam and Yunnan are recorded in the *Manshu* (Book of the Southern barbarians). Fan Chuo, the author of the book, was an officer of the Annam Protection Office who lost all his family during the Nanzhao attack of 863; Fan Chuo, *Manshu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1962), pp. 1–10.

Lý Nhân Tông, gave him a royal surname (Zhao), and assisted him with troops when he attempted to claim the throne after his father's death.[24]

All these examples illustrate the major features of Jiaozhi as an international port. As noted above, Jiaozhou and Guangzhou were both famous as Tang-era trading centres, but how the two differed has never been clear, or at least clearly spelt out. It now seems that while Guangzhou received most of its trade by sea, Jiaozhou established itself more in terms of its mountain and overland trade, through its connections with the Khmer, Cham, Lao and Yunnan regions. These were facilitated by its river–sea interconnections, in which central Vietnam played an important role. As a result, commodities for which Jiaozhi was famous throughout the centuries were largely not its own local products, as is emphasised by the contents of a 'tribute' list from Ngưu Hống (around today's Yên Châu, Sơn La province) and Ai Lao (somewhere in present-day Laos) to Đại Việt in 1067: 'gold, silver, aromatics, rhinoceros horn and elephant tusks'.[25]

The Jiaozhi Ocean in international perspective: Muslims and Đại Việt's intermediary position

Hu merchants, a collective name for merchants of South Asian – and later Middle Eastern – origin also had important contacts with Đại Việt. From the Han period onward, *Hu* merchants were encouraged to visit Jiaozhou, because its 'main value [to China] . . . was commercial', as pointed out by Wang Gungwu.[26] Under the rule of Governor Shixie (Viet. Sĩ Nhiếp) between 187–226, for example, several dozen *Hu* people were recorded as escorting his vehicle and burning joss-sticks along the way whenever he went out.[27] Jiaozhou was the place where Chinese merchants and officials could meet merchants from overseas half way. Such an intermediary tradition seems to have remained after the Vietnamese gained their independence in the tenth century. When Mongol envoys visited Đại Việt in 1266, they found a good number of Muslims (*Huihu* 回鶻) residing there. This discovery prompted a letter written by the Mongol emperor Kublai to Đại Việt in 1267, in which he criticised the Việt court for not allowing the numerous *Huihu* to talk to his envoys during their visit. In 1268, Kublai followed up with another attempt to approach the *Huihu* in Đại Việt, demanding that Emperor Trần Thánh Tông send the Muslim merchants to China so that he could ask them about the situation in the Middle East. Thánh Tông replied evasively, claiming that there had only been two Muslim merchants in the country, but that as both had died, Kublai's request could not be met, something the emperor angrily denounced as a lie.[28]

24 *Song huiyao jigao*, p. 7735.
25 *TT*, 3: 4a.
26 Wang, *Nanhai trade*, p. 30.
27 *TT, Ngoại kỷ*, 3: 10a–b.
28 The 1267 letter is in Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược* [A short history of Annam] (Huế: Viện Đại học Huế, 1961), *juan* 1, p. 33; the 1268 exchange is in *Yuanshi* [Yuan dynastic history] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1976), *juan* 209, pp. 4635–6. The term '*Huihu*' in most Chinese sources referred to the kingdom and the Uighur people in today's Xinjiang on the ancient Silk Road. However, an exhaustive search of the *Siku quanshu* collection of texts shows that in numerous sources from the Yuan (Mongol) period the term specifically referred to Muslim merchants from the Middle East; this was the very time that the term '*Huihu*' appeared repeatedly in the sources regarding Vietnam. '*Huihu*' could be Uighur, Khorezm or Muslim Turks and other peoples from the Middle East; my thanks to Igor de Rachewiltz, an authority on Yuan history, for his help with this term.

As Vietnam's own chronicles prove, Kublai was correct that connections did exist between Đại Việt, China and the Middle East. The *Toàn thư* recorded that in 1274, not long after the event mentioned above, a fleet of some 30 seagoing ships arrived from China. On the ships there were immigrants who brought along their treasures and their families. They called themselves '*Hui Ji*' (回鷄), which is almost certainly an error for '*Huihu*'(回鶻).[29] There must have been a considerable number of their own people already in Đại Việt for them to make such a big move. The Middle Eastern cultural presence in Trần Đại Việt was also clear from the same source. In fact, in 1268, the very year when the Mongol emperor requested a visit from the *Hu* merchants from Đại Việt, the junior ruler Trần Thánh Tông and his brother reportedly danced in the *Hu* style in the royal palace to amuse their father, the senior emperor, Trần Thái Tông. (Most Trần rulers abdicated before their death and held the title of *Thái Thượng Hoàng*, 'senior emperor', during the reign of their successor.) The *Toàn thư* specifically recorded that the senior ruler changed to a white cotton gown for the occasion. It should be noted that wearing white clothing at a celebration was neither a Chinese nor a Vietnamese custom at the time; rather, it would seem to have fitted the Central and South Asian practice of 'wearing white for celebrations and black for mourning'.[30]

Thánh Tông's son, Emperor Nhân Tông, repeatedly visited Champa in his private capacity as a Buddhist devotee. There he would have met many people from the Middle East, which would have opened the door to *Hu* cultural influences. Only in such a context can we understand seemingly isolated or incidental records in the *Toàn thư*, such as the 1304 reference to 'yoga monks coming from Champa, who drank milk only'. In 1311, there came another *Hu* monk who claimed to be 300 years old, and was said to be able to walk on water and carry out other supernatural deeds such as turning himself inside out to expose his entrails. It was his second visit to Đại Việt; this time he brought his daughter along and married her to Emperor Anh Tông. This marriage had most likely been arranged by Nhân Tông, who had received the monk during his first visit. That Đại Việt's court had frequent contact with Champa and beyond is also proved by the linguistic skills of the Trần aristocrats, acquired thanks to the intermediary position of Đại Việt in maritime travel. General Trần Quang Khải, for instance, mastered several languages, as did his brother Trần Nhật Duật. The latter prince could talk to the envoys from Temasek (today's Singapore) in their language, according to the *Toàn thư*; this could have been Malay but also Persian or Arabic.[31]

The Việt people certainly exploited their intermediary position between overseas countries and China. One of the products of Đại Việt in the thirteenth century was perfumed bracelets. To make these bracelets, Việt people would mix aromatic dust with

29 '(In 1274), Song people came to Đại Việt. They came on 30 ships carrying treasure and their families and were allowed to settle in Phố Tuần Phường, Thăng Long. They called themselves "*Hồi Kê*" [Chin. *Huiji*, 'Returning Chicken']. This was because we call the Song "Kê Quốc" [*Jiguo*, 'Chicken Country'], as they have brocades and medicines to sell and form markets' (*TT*, 5: 34a). The editors of the 1993 edition of the chronicle suggest that '*Huiji*' should be '*Huihu*', and I completely agree with this hypothesis; *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, vol. II (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1993), p. 39.

30 *TT*, 5: 32a. The Lý rulers of the twelfth century were recorded as wearing a yellow upper garment and a purple lower one, with gold pins in their hair. The rest of the men wore black, with silver or iron hairpins, while women favoured green dresses and black skirts; Fan, *Guihai yuheng zhi*, p. 52. The white cotton gown in this context might indeed be a quite different garment to mark the occasion.

31 *TT*, 6: 19b (1304), 6: 27b (1311), 6: 1b (Trần Quang Khải), 7: 2a–b (Trần Nhật Duật).

mud, shape the clay into beads and thread them with coloured silk, which they presumably obtained from West or South Asian merchants. These beads were then brought to China to sell and were reportedly very popular with women there.[32] The bracelets may also have been re-exported from China to other parts of Southeast Asia; Vietnamese ceramics found in a shipwreck in the southern Philippines included glass beads, as will be discussed below.

Hainan and its Muslim connections

The general Muslim connection with this area is clearer when Hainan Island is put into the picture. Jiaozhi had close connections with Hainan; the latter's main local goddess 'Li Mu' (the Mother of the ethnic Li people), for instance, was described as follows: 'She had eaten fruits of the mountains and lived in the trees. Then there was a man from Jiaozhi who crossed the sea and came to Hainan to gather aloewood [an aromatic]. She married him and they had many children and grandchildren. Only then did they start opening land and growing food.' Interestingly, her home area, Li Mu Mountain, was the location of the best aloewood.[33] This local legend not only hints at the source of Jiaozhi's aloewood, but also at more intimate and intertwined relations between Jiaozhi and Hainan. Other materials on the Song period also verify that people from Đại Việt visited Hainan to collect the wood, though trade with Hainanese was a more reliable source for this commodity. The Li people there 'live[d] by trading aromatic woods', according to the *Zhufanzhi*.[34] Some of the 'collectors' from Jiaozhi, therefore, might have been Vietnamese who came to Hainan to trade.

These aromatic woods, which formed an important part of Vietnamese cargoes, would re-emerge in the trading site of Qinzhou in Guangxi, where they were exchanged for silk with Chinese merchants who came from as far away as Sichuan:

> All of Jiaozhi's everyday wares depend on Qinzhou, thus ships constantly go back and forth between the two. The *boyi* [trade] field is East of the river outside the town. Those who come with sea products to exchange for rice and cotton fabric in small quantities are called the '*Dan* of Jiaozhi' [cf. the people known as *Dan* in Guangdong]. Those rich merchants who come to trade come from [Đại Việt's] border area of Vĩnh Yên prefecture to Qinzhou, these are called 'small present' (*xiaogang*). The 'large quantity present' (*dagang*) refers to the envoys sent by the court [of Đại Việt] to trade here. The goods they trade are gold, silver, copper coins, aloewood, varieties of fragrant wood, pearls, elephant tusks and rhinoceros horn. The small traders from our side who come to exchange paper, writing brushes, rice and cotton with the people of Jiaozhi do not deserve much mention; but there

32 Fan, *Guihai yuheng zhi*, p. 10.

33 Li Mu's story is from Liu Yi, *Ping Li ji* [A note on pacifying the Li], quoted in *Zhufanzhi buzhu* [New annotations on *Zhufanzhi*], ed. Han Zhenhua (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2000), p. 459; also see Wang Shixing, *Guangzhi yi* [Notes on the Guang] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981 reprint), p. 104. According to a late seventeenth-century source, 'the aloewood produced in Champa is not as good as that from Zhenla, and that from Zhenla is not as good as that from the Li area of Hainan. Within the Li area that from the eastern Li Mu mountain is the best quality in all the world'; Zhou Jiazhou, *Xiangcheng* [On aromatics], collected in *Qianlu* [On numismatics] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1991), p. 356.

34 Han ed., *Zhufanzhi*, *juan* 2, p. 443. Aromatic woods from Hainan were often exchanged for cattle in the Song period at a rate of one *dan* (60 kg) per head (Fan, *Guihai yuheng zhi*, p. 10). Visitors from Đại Việt to Hainan are mentioned in Qu Dajun, *Guangdong xinyu* [A new commentary on Guangdong] (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 1991), *juan* 8, p. 242.

> are rich merchants who bought brocades from Shu [Sichuan] to Qinzhou to trade for perfume once a year, often involving thousands of *quan* of cash. Those merchants haggle over prices for hours before reaching an agreement. Once it is agreed, no one is allowed to negotiate with other merchants. When the talk has just started, the gap between the asking price and the offer is often as huge as between heaven and earth. Our [Han Chinese] rich merchants send their servants to buy things to sustain their daily life and even build temporary residences and stay there, in order to frustrate the [Jiaozhi] merchants. Their rich merchants stay calm, and also use perseverance as a weapon. When the two merchants see each other, they drink together; and as time passes, they get along. Those smooth-talking ones cut or add a few [*quan*] so the prices from the two sides become closer and closer. [When the deal is made], the officers [at the markets] weigh the perfume and deliver the brocade for both sides to finish the deal. At the trading site the [Song] officers only levy taxes on the merchants of our side.[35]

As this passage shows, Jiaozhi was the most important participant in trade on the Chinese coast of the Tonkin Gulf and the exchanges carried out in this area were well developed and sophisticated. This trade could be regarded as either regional or local, given that it was at such a short distance by boat. Trade was surely an essential part of many people's lives in this region.

Hainan's most vital connection to the outside world, however, was Champa; beginning in the Song period, Cham envoys often stopped first in Hainan before proceeding to the mainland. It has been well established that the merchants most active in Hainan came from or went via Champa, where Muslim traders had set up stations as one link in their long chain of trade. In Guangzhou and Fujian, Cham/Muslim merchants lived as permanent residents in the foreign quarters (*fanfang*), while in Hainan they were mainly in Yaizhou.[36] Other foreign groups, probably also mostly from Champa, lived in Danxian in the northwestern section of Hainan and in Baisha.[37] Many of them had the family name 'Pu' ('Abu'). Pu family genealogies thus serve as clues to trace the links between Hainan, Indochina and mainland China. These family genealogies are found in Hainan (Yaizhou), Fujian (Dehua), Guangdong (Guangzhou) and the Qinzhou area in Guangxi. In other words, Pu families spread and lived where their trade was located, and the area around the Gulf of Tonkin was one of the places where they were concentrated. Although in recent years there have been some doubts expressed about the Muslim origin of the Pu, as Pierre-Yves Manguin has pointed out, Chinese and Arabic evidence 'establish[es] beyond cavil that at the beginning of the eighth century there were links between Campa, the colonies of Muslim merchants in South China, and the Pu families'.[38] In such a

35 Zhou, *Lingwai daida*, pp. 196–7.

36 On Muslim traders see Pierre-Yves Manguin, 'The introduction of Islam into Campa', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 58, 1 (1985): 1. It is not clear to what degree the 'Cham' merchants mentioned in the Chinese context were distinct from Persian and Arab groups. There were two *fanfang* in Yaizhou. In the *Yaizhou zhi* [Gazetteer of Yaizhou] we find the observation that 'the locals here are originally from Champa. They came in the Song and Yuan periods by ship and settled along the seaside, [their settlements] were called *fancun* and *fanpu*'; *Yaizhou zhi*, *juan* 8, in *Gugong zhenben congkan* (Taipei: Palace Museum, 2001), *juan* 194, p. 136.

37 Roderich Ptak, 'Hainan's position in maritime trade, c. 1000 to 1550', paper presented at the conference on China and Southeast Asia: The Changing Links through History, Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 19–21 July 2001.

38 Manguin, 'Introduction of Islam', p. 3; on Pu genealogies see Luo Xianglin, *Pu Shougeng zhuan* [A biography of Pu Shougeng], (Taipei: Zhonghua Wenhua Chuban Shiye Weiyuanhui, 1965), pp. 2–3.

way the Muslims in Hainan and their connections with the Quanzhou area in Fujian contributed critically to the latter province's commercial rise, as argued by Chang Pin-tsun. It seems reasonable to assume, as Roderik Ptak has done, that merchants from Champa, operating out of Hainan or regularly calling there, had some influence in mainland China's trading ports and that these groups were in close touch with, competed against or cooperated with other Islamic communities and the Fujianese.[39]

In this context it is unimaginable that Muslim traders should leave traces all around the Gulf of Tonkin in Qinzhou, Hainan and Champa but somehow slip by Đại Việt altogether during their thousand years of trade and communications in this area – yet this seems to be what the existing literature tells us. As Kenneth Hall has observed, all Việt references to the northern urban centres are coloured by the prejudices of later Confucian historians, in particular by their general scepticism towards trade. In such circumstances, Muslim connections would have been eradicated with double zeal by Confucian historians since these links would only import confusion and incoherence into their construction of a national story that was both ideologically and racially correct.[40] As a result, a crucial part of Vietnamese history was lost, as evidenced by the *Toàn thư* itself: in at least two cases, the names of overseas countries or peoples were written in the wrong characters: one is the *Huihu*, mentioned above, and the other is Temasek.[41] Because of this, two of Đại Việt's significant trade partners at the time disappeared into strange and unfamiliar names which people assumed were insignificant and local. This in turn further consolidated the impression of Đại Việt as a backwater of international commerce and a place having little to do with the rest of the world. Writing at least 150 years later than the events described and under a dominant Confucianist ideology, the *Toàn thư* writers demonstrated little care about the names of the peoples that their Việt ancestors had dealt with on a rather frequent basis. A critical body of evidence showing how different cultures and traditions nourished and shaped the society of Đại Việt was thus fragmented and buried in the dust.

Another reason that Vietnamese historians have tended to portray early Đại Việt as resembling China as much as possible may have been a matter of security. This concern was represented in a poem written by the usurping ruler Hồ Quý Ly, whose reign was the pretext for the Ming invasion of 1407. In answering a question from a Chinese visitor he said: 'If you ask me about the customs of Annam, I will tell you that customs are pure in Annam. The dress we follow is Tang fashion, and the rituals we practice are Han

39 Chang Pin-tsun, 'The formation of a maritime convention in Minnan (southern Fujian), c. 900–1200', in *From the Mediterranean to the China Sea: Miscellaneous notes*, ed. Claude Guillot, Denys Lombard and Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1999), pp. 148–50, 153. Being located between Champa and northern Đại Việt, Nghệ An may also have had close relations with both Champa and Hainan. Christopher Goscha reports that 'to this day, the Hainanese community of fishermen living on the island of Bạch Long Vĩ [Bailongwei] in the Gulf of Tonkin between Haiphong and Hainan speak Vietnamese and continue to trade with central Vietnam. Hainanese junk traders had long been particularly involved in the cinnamon trade with central Vietnam'; through Nghệ An their networks also extended to Laos. See Christopher Goscha, 'The maritime nature of the wars for Vietnam (1945–1975)', paper presented at the Fourth Triennial Vietnam Symposium, Texas Tech University, 11–13 April 2002.

40 Hall, *Maritime trade*, pp. 320–1. For an excellent critique of the Confucian historiographical tradition see Shawn McHale, '"Texts and bodies": Refashioning the disturbing past of Tran Vietnam (1225–1400)', *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42, 4 (1999): 495–516.

41 回鶻 was written as 回鶏, and 單馬錫 Temasek (today's Singapore) was written as 册馬錫.

[dynasty] style.'[42] He wrote this knowing that China was once again under the control of the ethnic Han after the overthrow of Mongol rule. Muslim and other alien connections were better hidden when the country was facing such a resurgent superpower. In Đại Việt as in China, Muslim (and Mongol) traces were most likely eradicated vigorously in the Ming period.

The close relationship between Hainan and Champa was recorded by a Chinese historian in the 1600s but was also grasped by the famous eighteenth-century Vietnamese historian Lê Quý Đôn, who cited him. The following quotation reflects Đôn's interest in this maritime space:

> Qu Dajun said in his *Guangdong xinyu* [New commentary on Guangdong] that 600 *li* south from Yaizhou [in Hainan] would be Champa. When the south wind is blowing [to Yaizhou], one could hear cocks crowing in Champa as clear as a bell. This is how close the two places are. [So] if Hainan is the screen of Guangdong, Champa is the screen of Hainan.[43]

Clearly for Lê Quý Đôn the whole region was connected by the sea and influenced by the trade winds, and state boundaries meant little. There is another important point in this context. Rather than imagining 'China' as some sort of solid cultural bloc delineated by its modern boundaries, spreading its civilisation to surrounding areas and thus influencing Vietnam from the north, we must keep in mind that until the Ming period (and as late as the mid-eighteenth century for Yunnan), large parts of Guangdong, Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan were most likely less 'developed' than the Tonkin area in both cultural and economic terms. In this respect, porcelain production serves as a useful index. While there were several well-known porcelain-producing areas in today's Hải Dương and Thanh Hóa by the thirteenth century, only one kiln is known to have existed in Guangxi and none in Yunnan.[44] A survey of the numbers of examination graduates from the Jiaozhi region compared to those from Guangxi, Yunnan and Hainan in the Tang period would show that Jiaozhi outstripped its neighbouring regions in terms of the degree of Sinicisation and the level of material culture. It is also well known that Hainan served as the main source of horses for Champa, at the time 'a highly cosmopolitan trading power with an agricultural base'.[45] It seems that while Southeast Asia functioned as a major source of primary products for China in the Age of Commerce, for a long period before that Hainan had served the same role for Đại Việt and Champa; rather than Han culture influencing Vietnam from the north, the Sinicised and more cosmopolitan Việt area might have served as a base of Han culture which influenced the Yunnan and Guangxi regions.

Vân Đồn and Hải Dương

It becomes increasingly clear from the discussion above that Vân Đồn, the main port for Đại Việt in the Trần and early Lê dynasties, was not randomly chosen, and that it

42 *Thơ văn Lý Trần* [Poetry and prose from the Lý and Trần period], vol. III (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), p. 245.

43 Lê Quý Đôn, *Vân đài loại ngữ* [Classified talk from the study] (Saigon: Phủ Quốc vụ khanh Đặc trách Văn hóa, 1972), 1: 32a–b; Đôn is citing Qu, *Guangdong xinyu*, p. 38.

44 Feng Xianming, *Zhongguo gutaoci wenxian jishi* [An annotated collection of historical documents on ancient Chinese ceramics], vol. I (Taipei: Yishujia, 2000), p. 142 for Guangxi.

45 Ian Mabbett, 'Buddhism in Champa', in *Southeast Asia in the 9th to 14th centuries*, ed. David Marr and Anthony C. Milner (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986), p. 292.

could not have emerged before the point when the late Tang governor Gao Pian removed the major obstacles to sea travel along the coast of the Gulf of Tonkin. (Both Whitmore and Momoki point out that the earlier Đại Việt port was located in the Nghê-Tĩnh region.)[46] The fact that the seemingly remote and isolated Vân Đồn was chosen as the country's main port has been regarded as confirmation of the view that Vietnamese dynasties preferred to have overseas trade carried out as far as possible from the capital and of the assumption that such activity was anything but central to the economy. However, if we recall that up to the fifteenth century, the main waterway connecting Đại Việt's capital and the Chinese coast was the Bạch Đằng River (which was then the main branch of the Red River, whereas now the main branch runs between Nam Định and Thái Bình), then we find Vân Đồn was located on the main traffic route of the day. It had developed during China's first 'commercial revolution' in the Song period, and was located in the heart of the Tonkin Gulf trading zone between Hainan and Qinzhou, both places frequented by Fujian, Cham and Muslim merchants.[47] The Yuan policy of favouring Muslim customs officers and merchants in Fujian must have contributed further to the rise of this Muslim-driven trading zone.

Such a zone becomes more visible when we bring the major ceramic production areas of Đại Việt at this time into the picture. There was remarkable population growth between *c.*1200 and 1340 – numbers doubled according to Yumio Sakurai – which must have encouraged the division of labour and stimulated handicraft production.[48] Ceramics were produced in numerous locations in the country, such as Thanh Hóa and Thiên Trường (see below). From the 1350s onwards some unofficial kilns emerged in the present Hải Dương area producing highly sophisticated ceramics, which marked an advanced stage of such production by the Vietnamese. Most of these eight kilns were found in the Chu Đậu area, only a short distance by boat from Vân Đồn. The engine for this ceramic production was the Cham/Muslim market, and it is notable that the flourishing of Việt ceramics during the fourteenth century coincided with the heyday of Champa, under the king known to the Vietnamese as Chế Bồng Nga. There is evidence that Đại Việt's blue-and-white wares were produced in response to demand from merchants serving the West Asian market, with the most spectacular products being exported as far away as Persia, Egypt and Turkey. Vietnamese wares have also been found in nearby Muslim areas, such as Sulawesi and the central and southern Philippines. Cham ceramics from Gò Sanh have been found in these same locations.[49]

46 Whitmore, '"Elephants can actually swim"', in Marr and Milner ed., *Southeast Asia*, p. 130; Momoki, 'Đại Việt', pp. 11–12.

47 The 'commercial revolution' is discussed in Mark Elvin, *The pattern of the Chinese past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973); on the Bạch Đằng see Đào Duy Anh, *Đất nước Việt Nam*, p. 37.

48 Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c. 800–1830, volume 1: Integration on the mainland* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 368, citing an unpublished manuscript by Sakurai entitled 'Vietnam after the Age of Commerce'.

49 Roxanna Brown, *The ceramics of South-East Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 28–9; John Stevenson and John Guy, *Vietnamese ceramics: A separate tradition* (Chicago: Art Media Resources, 1997), p. 54. These ceramics are preserved in imperial collections in association with Chinese wares of the Yuan and early Ming periods, which formed the bulk of these collections. On Gò Sanh see *Champa ceramics production and trade – Excavation report of the Gò Sanh kiln sites in Central Vietnam*, ed. Yogi Aoyagi and Gakuji Hasebe (Tokyo: Study Group of Gò Sanh Kiln Sites in Central Vietnam, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2002), pp. 8–9. My thanks to Momoki Shiro for bringing this source to my attention.

That Đại Việt ceramics were especially designated for overseas sale highlights the country's integration into the regional market. We know that glazed tiles of different shapes were made for eastern Java, following patterns supplied by the Majapahit court, and the clay and glaze types suggest that they were made in the Hải Dương area.[50] It is also interesting that Vietnamese wares found in a shipwreck (*c.*1470–80) salvaged in 1995 in the southern Philippines included glass beads and bronze rings, revealing the complex of commodities exchanged throughout the secondary trading systems of Southeast Asia. The clear Cham–Philippine connections of this period, well documented by Geoff Wade, add another piece to the Cham/Muslim trading jigsaw puzzle of this region.[51]

This view from the sea throws new light on the handicraft industry in the Hải Dương area as well. Many handicraft traders in Hanoi from the famous Thirty-Six Streets (*36 Phố Phường*, now known as the Old Quarter) traced their origins to Hải Dương – builders, carpenters, dyers, leather shoemakers and people skilled in woodcarving or in the print industry, as well as those involved with metalworking in Copper Street (Hàng Đồng) and Silver Street (Hàng Bạc). A goldsmith family in Hanoi recently also traced their origin back to Hải Dương.[52] All these different trades suggest that the latter area has had a long history of handicraft trade and industry, perhaps more so than Hanoi. Indeed, as early as the thirteenth century, this area was already well known for making a kind of bamboo hat (*nón Ma Lôi*), not unlike the renowned Huế bamboo hats in the eighteenth century.[53]

The above list of trades did not simply employ craftsmen; each industry would have also required thousands of labourers. Ceramic-making, for instance, is very labour-intensive: a single item could pass through at least 12 pairs of hands before being finished. Brick-making, a less complicated but related industry, involved not only craftsmen but also labourers cutting wood for fuel in the mountains or making charcoal, as well as digging and processing clay from the neighbourhood.[54] In Vân Đồn Island alone there are ruins of seven Trần-period temples, which suggests a considerable quantity of building

50 Brown, *Ceramics of South-East Asia*, p. 23; Stevenson and Guy, *Vietnamese ceramics*, p. 58.

51 *ACRO Update*, ed. Ho Chuimei (Chicago, 1996), no. 1, p. 3, cited in ibid., p. 56; Geoff Wade, 'On the possible Cham origin of the Philippine scripts', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 24, 1 (1993): 44–87.

52 Nguyễn Thừa Hỷ, *Thăng Long-Hà Nội, thế kỷ XVII-XVIII-XIX* [Thăng Long-Hanoi from the 17th to 19th centuries] (Hanoi: Hội Sử học Việt Nam, 1993), pp. 230–48. Also see the inscription by Hải Dương merchants based in Hàng Đào, Hanoi, in *Tuyển tập văn bia Hà Nội* [Collections of inscriptions in Hanoi] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1978), vol. II, pp. 146–8. On Hàng Đồng and Hàng Bạc see Nguyễn Vĩnh Phúc and Trần Huy Bá, *Đường phố Hà Nội* [Hanoi streets] (Hanoi: NXB Hà Nội, 1979), pp. 135–9, 176. The goldsmith family was mentioned in a report on Vietnamese TV channel 3, 30 April 2004.

53 *Yuenan lishi* (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1977), p. 212.

54 He Xiling *et al.*, *Daoguang Fuliang xianzhi* (Gazetteer of Fuliang district, Jiangxi), *juan* 8, pp. 37–43, quoted in *Zhongguo jindai shougongye ziliao* [Primary sources on the history of handicrafts in modern China], vol. I (Shanghai: Sanlian Press, 1957), pp. 19–24. In the Ming dynasty, Jingdezhen, the ceramics capital of China, was said to have several hundred thousand people working day and night. In the early 1990s in Hải Dương Vietnamese scholars excavated an area of 40,000 square metres to a depth of two metres, where they found more than 100 kiln foundations with tens of thousands of valuable artefacts. In another village nearby they found the remains of ceramics of 1,500 metres long and two metres deep, which flourished in the Trần and early Lê period as a ceramic centre; Vũ Ngọc Khánh, *Làng cổ truyền Việt Nam* [Ancient Vietnamese villages] (Hanoi: Thanh Niên, 2004), pp. 227–8. The present-day village produces only rice and the technique of making ceramics has been lost for centuries (p. 232).

materials being used and transported there. The number of people indirectly involved in the handicrafts industry in Hải Dương, in such areas as road and water transportation, building and food processing must have been considerable.[55]

This was the basis for 'the rise of popular mass markets', pointed out by Momoki Shiro.[56] The ceramic industry in Hải Dương, therefore, was not something that popped up incidentally as a sort of isolated trade carried out by a few otherwise peasant villages. Like many commercial centres in China, it was a specialized industry that flourished in concert with other local industries such as the trades listed above; this was also true for ship-/boat-building, cotton-weaving and salt-making. Consequently, the export industry of Đại Việt 'cannot simply be evaluated in terms of its share relative to total economic activities', as Kishimoto Mio has pointed out in the context of China.[57]

While the exact organisation of the handicraft industry in this period needs more study, Buddhist temples may have played a key role in linking elites, production and the markets. It is clear that temples were the most important customers for ceramics and building materials; their sheer number alone meant that their needs were more widespread and constant than those of the court. Equally important, temples may also have been the largest employers and promoters of the handicraft industry. Their links with overseas trade are ancient and well documented; for centuries the trade in religious relics was one of the central drivers of China–South Asia trade, along with the demand for aromatics to serve in rituals, a commodity that in turn increased the importance of Southeast Asian trade.[58] Scholars of other mainland Southeast Asian countries during this 'charter period' have also emphasised that economic expansion was centred on the endowment of Buddhist temples, and explored the role of the temple as a centre of local redistributive economies. Applying this insight helps in structuring a model to contextualise different economic activities and their relations to fourteenth-century Đại Việt society, and in making a qualitative analysis of the effects of foreign trade on the structure of the economy.[59]

It is interesting when we recall that Mount Yên Tử, the main Buddhist centre of Đại Việt in the late thirteenth century, is located in this region – in Uông Bí, modern Quảng Ninh. This is where Emperor Nhân Tông established a well-known Vietnamese Buddhist sect, the Trúc Lâm School – right in the heart of the trading zone. Another renowned temple, Quỳnh Lâm, was also built in this area by the famous monk Pháp Loa, who was

55 For the temples see Đỗ Văn Ninh, *Huyền đảo Vân Đồn* [Mysterious Vân Đồn Island] (Vân Đồn: Uỷ ban Nhân dân Huyện, 1997), pp. 177–99. The ceramics found in the Hội An shipwreck off the Cù Lao Chàm were believed to be from Chu Đậu, transported by river boats to Vân Đồn or some ports on the Gulf of Tonkin, then trans-shipped to the waiting ocean junks; *A sunken ship at Hoi An: Treasures from the Hoi An hoard* (Butterfield, 2000) p. x.

56 Momoki, 'Đại Việt', pp. 2–3.

57 Kishimoto Mio, 'The Nanhai trade and the structure of the Qing economy during the 18th century', Proceedings of the 13th International Association of Historians of Asia Conference, 1994, p. 2.

58 Wang, *Nanhai trade*, pp. 48–53.

59 I would like to thank Victor Lieberman (personal communication) for making this important point; on the economic role of temples see his *Strange parallels*, pp. 95–6; and Richard O'Connor, 'Sukhothai: Rule, religion and elite rivalry', in *The Ram Khamhaeng controversy*, ed. James Chamberlain (Bangkok: Siam Society, 1991), pp. 288–91.

said to have cast 1300 bronze Buddha statues during his lifetime.[60] Such an enterprise would have required a large amount of money and a remarkable workforce, but even more striking is the quantity of copper involved, considering that Đại Việt did not produce that metal during this period. One is reminded that Champa, through its links to the merchants from the Middle East, might have served as an important source for this metal. Cham links to copper is evident in a tribute list of 445 CE, when Linyi brought to China 10,000 catties (one catty = 600 grams) of gold, 100,000 of silver, and 300,000 of copper.[61] Champa might also serve as a source for religious inspiration for Đại Việt in this period. It is important to realise that Mahayana Buddhism was significant in both Champa and Đại Việt (along with Angkor at certain points in time), which explains King Trần Nhân Tông's visits to his southern neighbour.[62]

This area was also the real political centre of the Trần dynasty for more than 150 years. As the Trần kings repeatedly claimed, their family 'rose from the coast'. Beginning in 1239, the Trần court built another group of palaces in their hometown in Thiên Trường prefecture, close to today's Nam Định, a place much nearer to the sea than Hanoi. Like Ayudhya a century later, this political centre 'was surrounded by tidewater, and the coast there was full of fragrant trees and flowers. Gaily painted pleasure boats went back and forth [the place was] like a fairyland.' The Trần kings stayed in the Thiên Trường palaces more often than in Hanoi, making this area the *de facto* capital. As Whitmore points out, although the capital did not shift to the coast as Pegu and Ayudhya did later, the coast took control of the old capital itself.[63]

Such a cluster of political, religious and trading centres located next to each other – and next to the major centres of ceramic production – seems to confirm a model for ancient polities in modern central Vietnam which Japanese and Vietnamese scholars have applied over the last decade. The riverine polity is a tripartite organisation of power in which a religious centre (often in the mountains), a political centre (on the alluvial plain) and a port city are linked with each other by waterways.[64] Examples of connections between religious centres and ports would be the links between Mỹ Sơn and Hội An in central Vietnam or between Cát Tiên (in Lâm Đồng province) and Cần Giờ (now an outlying district of Hồ Chí Minh City).

The discussion above suggests a more integrated region than has previously been perceived. Scholars have presented Đại Việt as an entity under Chinese influence, Champa as one characterised by Indian culture and Hainan as a remote backwater in the

60 Hà Văn Tấn, Nguyễn Văn Kự and Phạm Ngọc Long, *Chuà Việt Nam; Buddhist temples* (Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1993), pp. 206–19 (Trúc Lâm) and 110 (Quỳnh Lâm). In 1329 alone the Trần aristocrats cast 1,300 Buddhas, and in 1324 they cast another 1,000; *Khảo cổ học Việt Nam* [Archaeology in Vietnam], ed. Hà Văn Tấn, vol. III (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 2002), p. 150.

61 Wang, *Nanhai trade*, p. 48.

62 Michael Vickery, 'Cambodia and its neighbours in the 15th century', Working Paper no. 27, Asia Research Institute, Singapore (2004), p. 6. (http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/docs/wps/wps04_027.pdf); Mabbett, 'Buddhism in Champa', p. 304.

63 Whitmore, 'Rise of the coast'; the description of Thiên Trường is from Lê Trắc, *An Nam chí lược*, *juan* 1, p. 19. On the coastal origins of the Trần see, for example, *TT*, 6: 7a.

64 Momoki Shiro, 'A short introduction to Champa studies', in *The dry areas in Southeast Asia: Harsh or benign environment*, ed. Fukui Hayao (Kyoto: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, 1999), p. 70. In a Southeast Asian context the riverine model has originally been applied to Srivijaya and Champa; see Hall, *Maritime trade*, especially ch. 4 and pp. 190–3.

middle of nowhere. Although physically located next to each other, the three have been seen as isolated localities with few or no cultural and economic commonalities. Archaeological work in central Vietnam over the last decade, however, reveals strong traces of Chinese influence in Cham culture, along with that of India. This is particularly evident in the northern part of Champa. While some of the Chinese influence undoubtedly came directly from mainland China, a large portion of it might have come second- or third-hand from Jiaozhi and Hainan through trade. Conversely, Champa's influence on Đại Việt also seems to have been more profound than previously accepted. The most recent discovery of the imperial palaces of the Lý, Trần and early Lê in the centre of Hanoi reveals the strong influence of Cham arts and architecture, suggesting frequent and intensive interactions between the two.[65]

A different map of ethnicity

The foregoing discussion raises the question of the peoples who lived around the Tonkin Gulf in the period. The Red River Delta has been considered homogeneously Vietnamese throughout Đại Việt history, something almost unique among all Southeast Asian countries. This may well have been the case after the fifteenth century, but *Viet sử lược*, compiled in the thirteenth century, reveals that as late as 1206, a large part of the coastal area was under the rule of local chiefs. Some of them were recorded as '*Liao*' in Chinese, which could refer to 'Lao' or other ethnic groups. At any rate they were non-Việt.[66] Situated among the different peoples along the Sino-Viet border areas, the Việt must have experienced both intensive and extensive ethnic mixing. These relations and interactions cannot be summarised in the simplistic nationalist paradigm of 'Việt' or 'Han' versus mountain peoples, but must have resulted from a long process of intensive interpenetration and absorption, after which more solid and rigid identities took shape in the modern period.

Half of Đại Việt's twelfth-century population came from southern China, according to the contemporary source *Lingwai daida*; there is no doubt exaggeration in this statement, but it contains a certain element of truth. Likewise, an important source for the ethnic Dan people (widespread in southern China) was originally Jiaozhi, according to a text compiled in the Qing period. They were certainly reported in the twelfth-century sources as the 'Jiaozhi Dan'. Typically living on water, they came to Qinzhou with fish and other sea products to exchange for rice and cloth.[67] It is not clear whether they were the same people described in the nineteenth-century Vietnamese gazetteer *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* who had moved from the islands into the Red River Delta and lived on fishing and salt-making, along with growing rice. As those people did not speak Vietnamese

65 Lieberman, *Strange parallels*, p. 357, notes the Viet court's attention to Indian-style deities and cults. I gained knowledge about the archaeology of Champa on a fieldtrip in central Vietnam in 1998 with a research team organised by Prof. Fukui Hayao, to whom I am most grateful. My gratitude also goes to Momoki Shiro and Nguyen Tiến Đông for their enlightenment on this issue, and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences for granting me a visit to the excavation site in Hanoi in May 2004.

66 These areas were located between today's Nam Định, Ninh Bình and Hưng Yên; see *VSL*, 3: 17b, 18b.

67 Zhou, *Lingwai daida*, p. 196; Mao Qiling, *Mansi hezhi* [A complete account of the barbarians and their institutions], in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu*, History 227 (Taipei: Zhuangyan Wenhua Shiye, 1996), *juan* 15, p. 698.

clearly, their language was referred to as '*tiếng vùng bể*' (language of the sea zone).[68] Some of them seem to have moved to the southern China coast, becoming or joining the Dan. It was among these fishing people that Mạc Đăng Dung, the founder of the Mạc dynasty in sixteenth-century Đại Việt, was raised and later rose to power. He came from Hải Dương, but his ancestors were Dan people from Guangdong.[69]

This intense and repeated mixing of peoples added vitality to the Lý and Trần. As in most parts of Southeast Asia, there was a remarkable lack of manpower in Jiaozhi until the mid-fourteenth century. Chinese were bought as slaves, as noted above. The vagabonds in Guangxi also often raided the local population – who could have been Nùng (Zhuang in China) or other ethnic groups in the region – and sold them to Jiaozhi.[70] Intermarriage also occurred between the Việt people and the Hainanese, as indicated by the legend of the Li Goddess mentioned above. Before the 'Age of Commerce', Jiaozhi was the most popular destination for Chinese refugees and migrants. When the Mongols invaded Đại Việt, for instance, they captured more than 400 refugee Song officials, so no doubt there had been many more ordinary Chinese. The Cham and Lao may have also been a strong presence in Đại Việt, leading the Trần to repeatedly issue edicts forbidding Cham and Lao speech along with Chinese-style clothing.[71]

The Qinzhou trading field was also the place from which the Trần royal family made its way to Vietnam, according to a legend of the Song period. The story goes that the first Trần king was a person from Changle district of Fuzhou who gambled his family wealth away and wandered to the Qinzhou area. As Vietnamese aristocrats often came here to trade, he met the granddaughter of the emperor, who fell in love with him and married him. While this story is like a fairy tale, it confirms the Vietnamese chronicles' account of the Trần family's ethnic origins, whereby the first emperor was a fourth-generation descendent of Fujianese immigrants.[72] It also verifies the evidence from *Lingwai daida* that trade carried out in the Qinzhou area involved large wealth and that the Việt elite participated in it.

The Trần's original Chinese background was well known and openly acknowledged by the Việt chroniclers of the *Toàn thư*. The question is, did the Trần family emerge individually and incidentally, as has been understood so far, or were they based on their own networks of allies? If the latter, what kind of allies were they? Scholars have agreed

68 Vũ Tự Lập *et al.*, *Văn hóa và cư dân đồng bằng Sông Hồng* [Culture and inhabitants of the Red River Delta] (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1991), p. 160; *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* [Gazetteer of Đại Nam], vol. III (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 1992), p. 334.

69 Yan Congjian, *Shuyu zhouzi lu* [Notes on the surrounding countries] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1993 reprint), p. 233; cf. the statement by Mạc Kính Thự to Qing officials that 'my ancestors came from Chaxiang village, Dongguan district, Guangdong' (Beijing National Archives No. 1 军机处录副奏折, vol. 7775, no. 25).

70 *Yaolu* [Notes on the Yao people], *juan* 69, quoted in *Gudai Zhong-Yue guanxishi ziliao xuanbian* [Primary sources on Sino-Vietnamese historical relations] (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1982), pp. 242–3.

71 *TT*, 7: 41b; Lieberman, *Strange parallels*, p. 362. The Mongol invasion is in *Yuanshi*, 'Annam', *juan* 209. This multi-ethnic picture was similar to that of the present-day Mekong Delta, where Vietnamese cohabit with Khmer, Cham and Chinese, and share significantly different cultural worldviews; Philip Taylor, 'The ethnicity of efficacy: Vietnamese goddess worship and the encoding of popular histories', *Asian Ethnicity*, 3, 2 (2002): 85–102.

72 *TT*, 5: 1a; the Chinese legend is in *Qidong yeyu*, quoted in *Gudai Zhong-Yue guanxishi*, pp. 187–8.

that flexibility of social and political systems aided the rise of the Trần. We have also seen that a successful Southeast Asian ruler was one who emerged from a group of competing chiefs or land-based elites, each with his own network of allies. In this context, it is worth asking whether the Gulf of Tonkin trading area provided an arena in which the Trần could rise successfully among their competitors. It appears so.[73] Vietnamese scholars have recently pointed out that the Trần family's economic base, which combined fisheries and agriculture, helped it win the throne.[74] This view recognises that economic sectors other than agriculture participated in the shaping of Vietnamese history, as well as underlining the vital role of the sea in the rise of the Trần. Putting their dynasty back into its historical background, we find a family of Fujianese descendants who made their living from the sea and intermarried with the Lý royal family thanks to their wealth. This is a common pattern in the history of other Southeast Asian countries. Placing the Trần into their historical context also reminds us of the Chinese ancestry of Trần Quốc Tuấn, the foremost Vietnamese national hero, referred to as 'Father' in a Việt folksong.[75] All this helps to recover those muted senses of place and identity that complicate and undermine the simple black-and-white story of nationalist historiography.

Conclusion

The discussion above raises more questions than it answers to an extent which would satisfy keen scholars. While our view from the sea casts serious doubt on the Sinic agrarian model of early Vietnamese political economy and ethnicity and moves Đại Việt closer to the rest of Southeast Asia, what we have seen are little more than broken dots on the coast, rather than a complete structure. We see the links that stretched from coast to coast in the Gulf of Tonkin, as well as between the Gulf and the Archipelago and beyond, yet we know precious little on the intermediate level – about how the ceramic production was organised, its relationship to the rise of a popular mass market and the fall of this once-active trading zone.

Yet the view from the sea has been helpful in breaking down the boundaries. The establishment of modern borders and of nationalist scholarship focused on separate and well-defined sections of state histories (such as the Tang, Song and Ming periods) or of the individual entities of China, Vietnam, Champa, etc. has left us with a Jiaozhi Ocean that is, metaphorically speaking, full of solid icebergs. It has become hard to imagine that these apparently separate entities, before drifting apart, came from the same glacier or ice-shelf, and thus were interconnected at birth. A view from the sea, as sketched here, reveals how national stories can hide the regional dynamics on which later states were founded.

73 Whitmore ('"Elephants can actually swim"', p. 131) argues that 'it would not be surprising if the Trần gained from the region's trade and its Chinese connection in their rise to power. [They] gained entrance to the capital through marrying into the royal family'.

74 *Lịch sử Việt Nam thế kỷ X – đầu thế kỷ XV* [Vietnamese history, tenth to the early fifteenth centuries], (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 2002), pp. 212–13.

75 The folksong goes as follows: '*Tháng Tám giỗ cha, tháng Ba giỗ mẹ*' (commemorate Father [Trần Hưng Đạo] in the eighth [lunar] month, and Mother [the goddess Liễu Hạnh] in the third [lunar] month).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022463405000433 Published online by Cambridge University Press